

Newspaper: _____

Daily Times

Date: _____

June 27, 2007

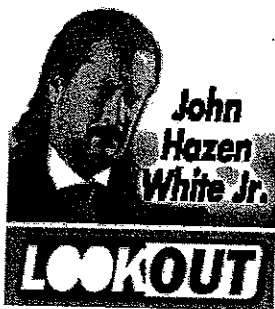
Unions are obstacle to controlling school costs

Local school officials in many of Rhode Island's cities and towns probably broke out in cold sweats when they learned that the legislature was not going to increase state aid to education for next year. Despite a collection of mayors trying, at the 11th hour, to get the General Assembly to pass a grab bag of new taxes and fees — principally on cable and satellite TV revenue and water usage — weary legislators failed to come to their rescue.

Adding to the nervousness at the local level is the fact that many communities are already being squeezed by the new property tax cap that limits increases to 5.25 percent, which will go down in years ahead. As always, local governments and school committees had been counting on an up-tick in state money — \$19 million, or 3 percent — to help fund their ever-increasing school budgets.

This time the legislature said no, giving them the same amount as last year's appropriation — \$864 million — and let it be known that the thinking on Smith Hill was that local school committees need to do a better job in controlling school spending, first and foremost. "Municipalities," said Newport Rep. Paul Crowley, should "finally have some very tough discussions ... on the issue of [teacher] compensation and benefits."

Rhode Island spends a lot on public education — more on average per pupil than many other states — and especially more for children with special needs. But the state doesn't score well in terms of student achievement or graduation rates. That's a frustrating fact, and it's only natural that people are now openly questioning what more money can accom-



plish in turning the situation around.

The biggest part of public education financing is what we pay our teachers in salaries and benefits. In the City of Warwick, for example, 85 percent of the total school budget goes for salaries and benefits. That leaves only 15 percent to fund everything else — books and supplies, building and grounds maintenance, special programs, and so on. Paying for teachers makes up the lion's share of expenses in practically every Rhode Island city and town. As a result, Rhode Island teachers bring home some of the highest salaries in the nation.

In Warwick, last year's resolution of a lengthy contract dispute with the historically obstreperous Warwick Teachers Union has left the city paying sizeable back pay to the teachers over a three-year period — on top of their current salaries. That has left the city committing 65 cents of every tax dollar to education, and, as cited above, almost all of it goes to salaries and benefits for teachers. The mayor has taken almost \$3 million out of the city's surplus fund to help with the payback, and the school committee will have to cut almost \$2 million out of its requested budget — but they can't touch a dime of teacher pay.

Providence faces an even bigger problem. As a large urban school district it normally gets a big share of state education money. It was counting on the 3 percent education increase and then some. School officials have said they are already "cutting into bone" in having to cut programs and services. It's not unthinkable that the state will have to take over running the Providence school system — as if the state is in much better shape!

Obviously, those recommended "tough discussions" between school committees and their teacher unions need to take place. But teacher unions, like all the public employee unions, are loathe to give up what they have won through hard negotiations over the years. They'd sooner cut off a finger than give in on anything. Look how difficult it was to get any of the unions to kick in a percentage for their health care. The crossing guards controversy in Cranston — an outrageous giveaway if ever there was one — is still not over because of determined union legal action.

The financial mess the state's in and the school financing dilemma confronting many of our communities are closely related problems. Both come down to unsustainable spending on personnel. That's why the public sector in Rhode Island is collapsing under its own weight. The unions are in charge, and reining them in is the biggest and toughest challenge this state faces.

Until next week ... Lookout.

The content and opinions expressed by John Hazen White Jr. in his LOOKOUT column are not necessarily those of this paper, or its parent company, RISN. Readers are invited to e-mail their responses to lookout@woonsocketcall.com, and look for selected responses in this paper on Fridays. When responding, please include your first name, city, and state.